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Curiosity never retires

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A class in T'ai Chi, taught by FULIR member Betty Greer, is a popular choice among Learning in Retirement participants.

Curiosity never retires

Learning in Retirement program going strong after 10 years

Think back to when you were in school. Wouldn't it have been fun to learn new ideas, listen to fascinating speakers and attend workshops, if only you hadn't had to study for exams? Wouldn't the ideal have been to take the courses you wanted to take rather than those that were required?

At Furman, you can do exactly that. No tests. No credits. Study only topics that interest you.

How? Through Furman University Learning in Retirement (FULIR, pronounced "fuller"), a program of non-credit classes for people of any age and any educational background. Now completing its 10th year, FULIR has grown from modest beginnings, with less than 60 people and a curriculum of seven courses, to its current robust status, with approximately 350 people choosing among 57 courses.

FULIR is one of the Lifelong Learning Institutes offered by more than 300 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. Each is operated somewhat differently, depending on the interests of its participants and the availability of campus space.

Programs at some schools meet only on Friday afternoons, when campus facilities are available. Others meet off campus in churches, retirement centers or library meeting rooms. FULIR is fortunate to be able to offer classes Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 4:45 p.m., in several locations around the Furman campus.

Lifelong Learning Institutes are health clubs for the brain. Recent research shows that mental fitness can help to ward off dementia. Even as we get older, the brain is capable of developing fresh neural pathways of reasoning.

Classes and new learning can help mitigate the effects of aging on the mind. FULIR members indicate that they are interested in keeping both mentally and physically fit by signing up for classes ranging from T'ai Chi to chess, hiking, Spanish, ballet appreciation and Shakespeare.

Elderhostel, begun 37 years ago, is a non-profit group based on the premise that it is never too late to learn. FULIR is a member of a network of Lifelong Learning Institutes that form one branch of Elderhostel. Instead of going on a trip somewhere to study, you can learn at your nearby college or university. Other programs near Furman include those at Duke University, University of North Carolina-Asheville, University of South Carolina branches at Aiken and Beaufort, College of Charleston, Anderson College and a new program this year at Clemson University.

The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that the population of those 65 and older will grow from one in eight Americans today to one in six by 2020. The mature adult population will total 53.3 million, representing a 61.5 percent increase over today's count of 33 million.

South Carolina anticipates that one-third of its residents will be 50 or older by 2015. A sharp rise in the percentage of college-educated senior adults is also expected.

The people who participate in FULIR are busy. They fit their classes in "England and the Celtic Fringe" around their golf games, "Digital Photography" around deliveries for Meals on Wheels and work at soup kitchens, and "Southeast Asia: Crossroads of Culture" around their family and church activities.

When the program began in 1993, I thought that the curriculum was the major draw. However, the many social benefits may be just as important as the intellectual ones. It's unique to find someone else who revels in learning about memoir writing, the plays of Eugene O'Neill, the Internet or the history of the Dark Corner. FULIR students find that they enjoy going to lunch together, attending plays or athletic events on campus, or attending the many musical programs, art exhibits and other cultural events Furman offers. Members become close friends and often offer support to each other during difficult times. We've even had two marriages among FULIR members!

Our oldest member (who will admit his age) is Nick Cassano, now 91. His 90th birthday party was such a hit with his FULIR friends that we decided to have a party for any member when they reached 90. We've had two more 90th birthdays and have a handful of members within a year or two of their 90th.

FULIR classes are taught by Furman professors, retired Furman faculty, Furman students, FULIR students, and people from the community — all for free. Instructors are offered a \$50 honorarium (not enough to pay for their gas back and forth to the campus for 10 weeks) — or the far more popular voucher for membership in the program the next term.

The real "pay" for their instruction is a class full of truly interested students who want to be there and want to learn what the professor has to teach. This seems to be the essence of good education: competent teachers passionate about their subject and students who are eager to learn.

As they pass FULIR students in the hallways between classes, Furman undergraduates see that learning is a lifelong pursuit. And in being introduced to the excellent quality of teaching at Furman, FULIR members have become some of the university's strongest advocates in the community.

FULIR is giving its members a fuller life, and showing others that curiosity and learning never need to retire.

— Sarah Fletcher

The author has been director of the Furman University Learning in Retirement program since 1993.